

**TABLE RONDE (samedi 15 mars, 15 h à 17 h)
animée par Georges BAS :**

« Qu'est-ce qu'un dramaturge engagé ? »

« What is a committed playwright ? »

N.B. Ce qui suit n'est pas une transcription littérale et intégrale des diverses interventions ayant constitué la Table Ronde, mais une version synthétique, condensée et réorganisée, que j'espère néanmoins fidèle à la teneur des propos et à l'orientation générale du débat. Les membres de phrase entre parenthèses sont la citation d'arguments qu'il a paru bon de reproduire. La Table Ronde ayant eu lieu en anglais, ce compte rendu est en anglais. - G.B.

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Georges BAS suggests that if precious time should not be wasted on definitions and meanings (and « committed » connotes something different from « engagé »), there should be some measure of agreement about what is going to be debated. In connection with writers or artists, commitment is usually understood as having social and/or political applications. Also, one is actually committed to something, most often a cause, which may be more or less specific or broad. More especially, the issues raised range from the concept being glossed as meaning « oppositional » or « interventionist », radical or militant, to its being equated with « left-wing » or « leftist », and implying socialist, not to say Marxist, views.

After suggestions by Colette GERBAUD that the cause may be religious (and « ideologically neutral »), and by John ELSOM that one should not overlook the passive connotation of such uses as « being committed to » a jail or an asylum, Edward BRAUN agrees that, though « committed drama » is too often just « a phrase used by critics », hair-splitting should be avoided even if the result is « an embargo on the word commitment ». To him the crux of the argument is realism ; the committed writer is the one who shows how human behaviour is shaped by material circumstances.

Trevor GRIFFITHS thinks that any writer's duty is first and foremost « a coherent commitment to the craft », « you have to be committed to bricks and mortar, to skills ». The rest of his argument will bring up three major issues. According to him, the « vision » of some writers is that of a different world and the precise way in which it might be made to materialize, while the vision of others is simply the world as it is and their job is to try and give a powerful and perceptive account of it. This is « naturalism », a scientific approach to the world we live in, which used to be the most progressive form of drama we had. But to describe seriously and accurately is also to criticize (see Zola). Showing « poverty cheek by jowl with wealth » is an invitation to people to take the problem back into their

own lives and seek to do something about it. Edward BRAUN agrees that « naturalism » is the fundamental starting-point.

As to the relation between « committed » and « political », Trevor GRIFFITHS makes no difference between them, and what is said about the one could be said about the other. He notes that he is always called a political playwright. To him the word, as used in Britain about somebody, is « a cold word ». It usually implies that one is left-wing and means « distrust this person ». As a matter of fact all writing is political, a great deal of what passes for non-political writing *is* political (since points of view ultimately « feed into systems of thought and patterns of practices »), but his own writing « is consciously political ». On the other hand he considers that « commitments » and « allegiances » ought to be separated ; to him commitments cannot not be religious, while allegiances tend to be. (TG declaring he refuses the « history » offered by John ELSOM in his paper leads to a debate with Edward BRAUN, John ELSOM and Rob RITCHIE about Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*, the question of subsidies and the nature of censorship (Mary Whitehouse), the problem of toleration and the move to the right of the cultural climate in Britain).

To Trevor GRIFFITHS commitment is basically tied up to what he calls « cultural penetration ». A playwright uses a certain medium to « develop certain practices » in order to « do cultural penetration ». Answering a query from Daniel SALEM about this concept, TG glosses it as referring to what has come to be called a mass society, the problem being « how to shift people's understanding of the world in which they live and engage them in discussion about the possibilities of changing it ». He declares finding it difficult to do that from the stage and thinks it requires a medium « which is more active, vibrant and popular than theatre » -- that is to say television.

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This prompts Georges BAS to introduce the problem of audiences, their sociological nature and their size, and of the relationship between a playwright and the audience he chooses to address. In other words, can a playwright claim to be committed and write plays for middle-class audiences to be performed in such Establishment, venues as the National Theatre, etc... ? (See John McGrath's attack of Edward Bond and others on this point). What of such a dilemma as: either work outside the system for popular, lower-class audiences, or work within the system to alter the middle-class consciousness ?

This immediately shifts to the (by now) time-honoured « TV versus Theatre » debate, with Edward BRAUN and Raymond PROST speaking for television and Georges BAS for theatre, while John ELSOM considers that ideas should not be « funnelled through one sole opening ». Trevor GRIFFITHS mentions his own *Bill Brand*, which got big popular audiences on TV while dealing with the arid (though topical) subject of monetarism. John McGrath may be addressing himself to the working-class in the theatre, but one reaches it through TV. The relevance of drama to society is to be found on TV, whereas theatre is only « a marginal case ».

Taking his cue from a remark by Daniel SALEM about a possible « mission for the playwright », Trevor GRIFFITHS stresses that a play may be many things

(informative, celebratory, critical, etc.) except a programme for change, a treatise, or a platform ; it reflects the tensions and contradictions of daily experience ; « and plays are very messy things as well ». Any formula writing is to be avoided, especially « the formulas of TV », even though people think that mass audiences do require such formulas.

Daniel SALEM suggests that « a relationship of trust and mutual celebration » might be an acceptable formula, which causes Trevor GRIFFITHS to remark that, if this were a criterion for being a good or important playwright, Samuel Beckett should be excluded, as he does anything but « affirm life », and yet he *is* a great writer. (TG sees Beckett as being in the line of Adorno saying that « there can be no more music » after the Nazi holocaust (1). This is the same as Eddie Waters in *Comedians* saying « no more jokes »). Being asked by Daniel SALEM whether *Comedians* « affirms life », TG answers that it does, but it also « affirms the struggle of life, it affirms resistance ».

John ELSOM construes Trevor GRIFFITHS'view of commitment as being « the better world which can be and is not simply bogged down in the misery of the world that is ». This brings him to criticize left-wing writers, who have been « conducting autopsies » (with regrets and recriminations) but have not presented a clear enough picture of the world which could be. To which TG replies that descriptions of the present are anticipations of the future. Developing this argument, he notes that *Comedians* celebrates the inventiveness of ordinary people and so doing invites the audience to shed stereotyped ways of thinking about working-class people. (He is also led to declare that whatever is collective, social and organized - (« cooperative » even - in man's life is always more satisfactory than what is « privatized »).

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The next step if for Georges BAS to point out that a few « Key words » keep recurring in connection with committed drama. These are « change » (« change society », « change the world »), often made more definite as « revolution », and « socialism », a vague notion at times more specifically identified as « Marxism ». When committed playwrights call for a revolution in Britain, what can they possibly mean ? And if a socialist society is to be established, what is to be understood ?

Edward BRAUN notes that indeed, while revolution is regarded as desirable, such plays as *The Churchill Play* (by Howard Brenton) seem to show there is little prospect of this taking place. He repeats that what distinguishes « the drama we are talking about » is a rigorous scrutiny of things as they are. Rob RITCHIE agrees that the best of contemporary English drama is this spirit of enquiry or questioning and criticism. This (rather than pre-made and fixed ideologies) has « radicalized » the dramatists' views, and occurs within a « general culture » that can usefully be called « socialist », but varieties within it are extensive. As to what the « real world » may be, Peter BRASCH asks what « reality » can mean in a country (i.e. East Germany) where revolution has been imported.

According to Trevor GRIFFITHS no one of the so-called committed / political playwrights in contemporary Britain - whether Edward Bond, John McGarth or

himself - comes from a politically committed background. That is they did not receive their commitment from their parents or family background. It came to them in the act of « describing » and « evaluating » the world. As to a « revolution » in the late eighties in Britain, « May 68 » in France shows no one can foretell when a « revolution » is about to break out. And as to the nature of such a forthcoming revolution, he sees it as anything but « an insurrectionary process led by a Leninist party ». It is important to keep trying to define the concept of revolution, but not according to « any of the old historical models ».

Later on in the discussion, Georges BAS will return to the problem of socialism and the difficulty of defining it (witness the various definitions given by the numerous self-proclaimed « socialist » contemporary British playwrights). As Trevor GRIFFITHS is often said to be a « socialist » playwright, GB asks him whether he considers he is. TG answers he prefers to call himself just « a playwright », but adds that « as a social being and agent » he is committed to « struggling for socialist policies in government and socialist practices in society ». As to defining it, « socialism is not an excluding category », what matters is your attitude to specific issues, and TG cannot define what (for example) his friend John McGrath's conception of socialism is, and vice versa. (This leads John ELSOM to explain how « the contorted thinking » of the Left on such issues as opposing the American intervention in Vietnam prevented him from joining the Labour Party).

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All of the so-called committed British playwrights being « left-wing », Georges BAS asks whether one can be committed to right-wing views. (A few of the political / committed poets of the Thirties supported the cause of Fascism). Can the later Stoppard be called a committed playwright ?

A short exchange of conflicting opinions shows John ELSOM declaring that right-wing commitment is paradoxical and « sounds odd », against Trevor GRIFFITHS pointing out the existence of « committed Thatcherism », which is « commitment to reaction ». Daniel SALEM thinks that Samuel Beckett's characters are really committed to a rejection of what they believe is an illusion, which causes Edward BRAUN to declare it is a right-wing characteristic to pretend there is no such thing as ideology, and TG to stress there *is* an ideological (right-wing) « base to what Pinter says and writes ».

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Another tack tried by Georges BAS is to bring up the point of « praxis », or efficiency. The very nature of committed drama and its advocacy of change might lead us to assess it according to the results it does or does not bring about (these may be long-range alterations in the consciousness of people). Can contemporary British political drama be considered as « influential » in any way ?

To Edward BRAUN a good indication of « entry into consciousness » is the fact that drama is used as subject-matter by newspapers. John ELSOM finds it

« disturbing » that governments should justify censorship because theatre can do harm as well as good. He thinks audiences always receive it as « make-believe », and that it is impossible to condition in advance what the audience reaction and the final impact of drama are going to be. EB remarks that censorship in the Soviet Union is (ironically) a measure of how seriously the arts are taken there. On the other hand it is « criminal double-think » for governments to pretend they « free the arts » when they decide not to interfere, that is when they cut public subsidies and leave the theatre to be subsidized by the public sector (he mentions the case of the British Old Vic).

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Georges BAS then notes that one of the original features of contemporary British theatre is an important body of work done by women dramatists who happen to be left-wing and/or socialist (Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, etc.). Bearing in mind what the specificity and scope of commitment can be, are these women dramatists committed to the « feminist » cause only or to broader issues ?

Rosette GLASER remarks that nothing much seems to have followed the « outburst of live events » by women in 1982 (what of Nell Dunn after *Steaming* ?). Women dramatists seem to have taken up « acrobatics », caricature, « stand up » comic techniques. To Rob RITCHIE this does not mean that nothing has been done ; he could list about twenty women writers in London doing exciting work. What women dramatists do is to give another version of reality. Edward BRAUN underlines the fact that, in spite of numerous plays by women, « decision-making » remains male-dominated. He mentions his own Drama Department at Bristol, where *he* runs a seminar on women dramatists, as no woman was found to run it. What he finds in the plays by women is a concrete observation of women's situation, but also a formal expression which is remarkably inventive. John ELSOM considers that what he calls the « competitive debate » or « macho struggle » is an important element in drama. But women find this dislikable and are looking for ways to combat it.

A little further on Daniel SALEM asks Trevor GRIFFITHS about the « secondary part » women have in his plays. TG's answer is that the « feminization » of his own consciousness was a long and slow process. He puts this down to « early distortive shaping » in his own family background (with a very traditional view of the roles of men and women). Though he thinks that « putting the woman absolutely centre stage » can be « a kind of evasive dishonesty », of « propaganda », the feminist movement has made him reconsider his own life. This brings John ELSOM to insist that easy definitions of the « typical roles » of men and women (something infinitely complex) can be too one-sided and turn out to be damaging to human relationships, friendships or loves.

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As against such a specific issue, perhaps the broadest one concerning committed drama (as well as any form of committed art) is the one that was stated in

connection with the left-wing poets of the Thirties. These are reputed to have felt both « a civic urge to become *engagé* » and « an artistic urge to remain disengaged ». Georges BAS asks Trevor GRIFFITHS whether he feels he has to face and solve this crucial dilemma.

Trevor GRIFFITHS prefers to phrase this « dialectic » differently. On the one hand, « it's a revolutionary duty to tell the truth ». You have a commitment to what you do, and this is to « get to what is true » (not the same thing as marching, demonstrating and waving flags). On the other hand, you have (as said before) a formal commitment to your craft. John ELSOM notes that being « artistically disengaged » does not necessarily mean that questions are left open. It may be necessary from an artistic point of view to resolve such questions.

Kathie BIRAT raises the problem of the relationship between political involvement and theatrical technique. Can theatre be politically progressive without making any formal experiments ? This is an occasion for Trevor GRIFFITHS to question Brecht's views on the death of « naturalism », and to go into a critique of Brecht's statements and practices. Brecht has produced successful plays and *is* a great playwright. But you may use the « right » method and still give wrong answers : Brecht has been shown to be wrong in his analysis of capitalism. As to himself TG considers he has been working « in and around the modes of realism » (if not strict naturalism). Several major forces have come to bear upon him (from the cinema and TV to pantomime and the circus) and he may well attempt to write in an impressionistic or imaginistic way, yet he agrees with Raymond Williams that « naturalism is not ended, its day is not over ». It is still capable of presenting powerful pictures and powerful critiques of the world in which we live.

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Georges BAS feels that with this return to the topic of naturalism / realism the wheel of the discussion has « come full circle ». It only remains for him to wind up the proceedings with an adapted quotation from a critic's assessment of Trevor GRIFFITHS (2), which he addresses to the audience in this way, « I hope you will agree we have had with us for two full days 'one of those rare politically committed playwrights who is able to move audiences without haranguing them' and also 'without the self-conscious dramaturgy of Brecht, the agonizing and accusatory prefaces of Bond, or the overt propagandizing of Arden and D'Arcy', and I am sure you have identified the man ».

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NOTES

- (1) At the end of his Introduction to *The Fool*, Edward Bond also refers (in order to refute it) to this opinion of Adorno's, but reports him as saying that after Auschwitz it is no longer possible to write any « poetry ».
- (2) See Albert Wertheim, « Trevor Griffiths : Playwriting and Politics », in *Essays on Contemporary British Drama*, Ed. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (München, 1981) p. 267.